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TAGS: PGOV PHUM RW

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF RWANDA RELEASES PRISONERS

REF: KIGALI 110

Classified By: Charge Michael E. Thurston, reason 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (U) In fulfillment of a January cabinet decision, on February 19 the Rwandan government began the release of over 9,000 prisoners, approximately 8,000 suspected genocidaires (those who participated in the 1994 genocide) and about 1,000 ordinary criminals already convicted and serving their sentences (reftel). The releases began from prisons around Rwanda, with a radio announcement by the Minister of Justice, and press coverage in local outlets. Those released amongst genocide suspects include the elderly, the ill, and those whose detention periods would likely equal whatever sentence they might receive from the traditionally-based genocide "gacaca" courts. Ordinary criminals had to meet established parole requirements, including a record of good behavior, and the fulfillment of at least a quarter of their sentences. Certain categories of ordinary prisoner are ineligible for parole, including murderers, embezzlers, and rapists. This release follows other prisoner releases in 2003, 2004, and ¶2005.

¶2. (SBU) Minister of Justice Tharcisse Karugarama told us February 20 that his ministry had final say on the prison releases, following review of the prisoner files by the Prison Service and the Office of the Prosecutor General. "Our action is fairly automatic," he said. "We basically verify that the various requirements have been met and then approve the release." The Minister said that the GOR would likely engage in another prison release later this year, one of similar size. "We found earlier releases were too large," he said. "Better to split them up, it's easier administratively." The minister predicted that the present release would be completed by Wednesday, February 21.

¶3. (C) This release comes as Rwanda's prisons are rapidly filling with those convicted in gacaca courts of genocide crimes. At the end of the year, the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC) estimated that the prison population had been rising by a thousand prisoners a month for several months. The ICRC has now revised those figures, and sees as many as 2,500 new prisoners a month flowing into Rwanda's prisons. The pressure on the prison system is acute and growing, according to ICRC and prison service officials.

¶4. (SBU) Comment. Successive prisoner releases since 2003 have reduced the size of the prison population, but it is now rising as the gacaca system continues its nationwide adjudication in 1545 courts. This release will reduce the pressure on the nation's prisons, but only temporarily. With hundreds of thousands of cases left to adjudicate, intended reforms in the gacaca system, which reduce the length of

sentences and increase community service options (reftel)
will take on added importance. A prison population composed
largely of genocide suspects will become a population of
convicted genocidaires End Comment.

THURSTON